

The reference for this article is Guyver, R.M. (1990) 'History's Domesday Book', *History Workshop Journal*, 30, Autumn, pp 100 – 108.

This number of *History Workshop Journal* followed a conference *History, the Nation and the Schools* at Ruskin College Oxford.

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## **History's Domesday Book** *by Robert M. Guyver*

The publication of the National Curriculum History Working Group's *Interim Report*<sup>i</sup> in August 1989 was followed by a vast consultation exercise in which 17,000 copies of the Report were distributed and 1,000 submissions received, ten times the number for the parallel report on English. However, many primary schools did not realize that they would not automatically receive the report and waited in vain. The breakdown of submissions reflects this.<sup>ii</sup>

Colleges of further education	8
Higher education academics	37
Higher education teacher trainers	16
Local Education Authority associations	68
LEA officials	55
Organizations	123
Primary schools	52
Private individuals	97
Secondary schools	303
Teachers	230
Independent schools	9

The total is 998. Perhaps the most significant part of the summary of the responses in the *Final Report* is that on assessment (para 12, page 204):

Many correspondents were disappointed that we had been unable to comment more fully about assessment. However, virtually all expressed concern that the Secretary of State had asked us to reconsider including historical knowledge in attainment targets. A large number anticipated difficult areas of assessment which we would need to consider, such as the feasibility of 10 levels of attainment for each attainment target and of constructing a course for key stage 4 accorded 2 periods per week.

This was only a very small part of the *Final Report*, but quite a significant part in the light of the fact that the Secretary of State in a letter to Philip Halsey, Chairman of SEAC, in April 1990, was stressing his personal belief in the importance of assessing levels of historical knowledge.<sup>iii</sup> It was out of a wish to make it known to the general public that I spoke to a journalist with the *Independent*, Ngaio Crequer, whose article about this appeared on 6 April.<sup>iv</sup> I was very worried that the basic structure and philosophy of History teaching as put forward by the History Working Group, of which I was a member, would be radically changed by politicians and civil servants meeting ‘behind closed doors’. I felt quite strongly that the History Working Group’s basic philosophy had been given support by an overwhelming majority of correspondents, and that therefore there had actually already been consultation over this particular issue.

I was one of those given the specific task of reading the submissions on the *Interim Report* and reporting back to the rest of the History Working Group. I remember especially the impression of a growing sense of frustration and despair coming from the largest constituency – the teachers of key stages 3 and 4, many of them heads of department. For many years they had been used to designing and implementing their own courses (especially in key stage 3). A future in which they would have to deliver a ‘prescriptive’ course designed by a government-picked panel of ‘experts’ was likened by many to a future where the mainstay of their professionalism – the creative designing and teaching of courses which varied every few years – would be taken away from them. Most of these secondary teachers of History were graduates; some were experts on certain fields of history; some sent in sample programmes of study; many sent in copies of their own school curricula, and compared the *Interim Report* recommendations unfavourably to them. There were hundreds of letters from angry secondary teachers or from their heads of department representing them. They felt that this new curriculum would reduce their role as teachers to that of robotic automata delivering in monotone a course to which they had not personally contributed. It was someone else’s imposed curriculum.

Despite this, there was overwhelming support for the ideas enshrined in the attainment targets and sample statements of attainment. Here teachers felt that their personal contributions to the organization of a course would be needed, indeed essential, for delivery of the content of the History Study Units. Thus there would be teacher-involvement in the designing of pupils’

tasks, but very little teacher-involvement in the selection of the subject-matter. More choice was called for, especially in key stage 4, where there was precious little choice and hardly any room for individual initiative.

The relationship between knowledge, understanding and skills was depicted in graphical form by the so-called 'helical cone' (*Interim Report* p. 13). This representation met with wide approval, though I think that its real significance lies in how it shows that children learn history. The model can be compared to the findings of Crick and Watson about the nature of DNA.<sup>v</sup> Life itself is a molecular structure which looks like a double helix. Recent DNA findings have concluded that the important element is not the twin helix, but the fact that there are two strands which somehow 'zip' together when each strand has mastered a certain code. This learnt code is 'replicated' to form new DNA elements. It seems to me that children learn history (or anything) in a similar way. The two strands of understanding and skills on the outside of the helical cone and their relationship with a body of knowledge may be likened to twin strands of ivy creeping up the tree of knowledge. However, the metaphor rests on an unfortunate assumption that the body of historical knowledge may be fixed. Tree is better than cone, because at least trees do grow and cones (usually) do not. The past, as everything that happened, is fixed but only partially uncovered. Historians' knowledge of the past cannot therefore be fixed, it can grow or contract according to the relationship of the skills/understanding with the record of the past. Each new foray into historical understanding may yield new knowledge, but the dimension of past time or time past is one which the model of the helical cone cannot fully apprehend. The record of the past is not the past itself. There are really four dimensions: the past, the record of it, skills, and understanding.

Another source for the helical cone model is of course the American educationalist Jerome Bruner and his theory of the 'spiral curriculum'. Bruner developed his theories in two books: *The Process of Education*, 1960, and *Towards a Theory of Instruction*, 1966<sup>vi</sup>. The crux of his thesis is that the essence of any subject can be taught in an honest form even to very young children. Subjects are rather like onions though – they have an inner core and an almost infinite number of outer layers. Bruner was the inspiration behind many of the educational initiatives in History and the Humanities in the late sixties and seventies.<sup>vii</sup>

Bruner's philosophy can easily be applied to some at least of the skills of historians. But knowledge itself is not so easy to 'spiral'. The model of the cone of knowledge, its diameter growing in proportion to the growth of the skills and understanding applied to the knowledge or perhaps arising out of the study of History, amounts virtually to a new educational theory. The *Interim Report* gave it expression in the context of a national curriculum for History, a suitable occasion for a new theory.

There is and has been for years an even deeper debate about the nature of knowledge itself. Bertrand Russell and A.J. Ayer made considerable

contributions to this.<sup>viii</sup> I am not a scientist or a philosopher, merely, like most primary teachers, a dilettante. All knowledge is tentative, depends on the evidence of our senses. Likewise the expression of knowledge requires the use of language with all its limitations and ramifications of meaning. It is easy for philosophers of knowledge to be cynical about the possibility of objective truth; but historians are also psychologists, and knowledge about people, governments, wars, famines, migrations is of a somewhat different order. Historians are more akin to journalists as they need observational insights, but I suspect that a good historian also has to have the wisdom of a high court judge.

The academic historians who bothered to write in response to the *Interim Report* overwhelmingly supported its philosophy and hailed it as a landmark in the fruitless debate about skills, concepts and knowledge. The National Curriculum structure, both as expressed in the TGAT report and as developed by the History Working Group in its mid-term report seemed to have helped by defining the relative positions of knowing, understanding and doing in the whole 5-16 learning process. Many historians were of the opinion that historical knowledge is unique in that it depends on extant evidence (as well as on a whole range of supporting, eclectic disciplines) and that the skills which a historian brings to narrative, explanation and argument are somehow integrated with the skills that are necessary in handling the evidence and making informed judgements from it. One Oxford academic made perhaps the most telling remark. We all know that even though the *Interim Report* and now the Final Report may have gone some way towards the resolution of the dispute between New History and Traditional History, the dispute is still there, and is currently (I write in early June 1990) being kept alive by the History Curriculum Association. This Oxford sage understood more deeply than any other commentator the reason behind the dispute. He appealed for a new definition of what constituted the historian's skills. Alongside the skills that are necessary for a close analysis of a few documents (perhaps including detailed knowledge about their context) other skills are needed for dealing with broad fields of historical knowledge. The ability to handle the concepts of causation and change is a grey distillation of the polychromatic rainbow of skills which historians deploy in using their knowledge of personalities, a complex web of events, a maze of situations, a time-cable of a thousand strands of inter-connected developments. Knowledge, despite all its potential for misinterpretation or misreading of evidence or 'facts', is there right at the heart of the historian's thought-process. The point is that the ability to take a broad view, or to know developments across a broad or even 'grand' narrative is as important as the ability to analyze a single important document (like Magna Carta).

Whether the *Interim Report* gave this view sufficient prominence is a matter for interpretation. The philosophy behind the selection of the core British History Study Units for each key stage was certainly that of adequate

chronological coverage. The *post-Final Report* debate has now (mid-1990) developed into two strands. The first is Mrs Thatcher's argument, about the overburdening of teachers with both detail and a massive National Curriculum structure. The other is the debate about 'essential information' in the programmes of study and the adequacy of the recommended attainment targets for assessing historical knowledge.

The teachers who wrote responses after the publication of the *Interim Report* were not so worried about the second as the first. In her interview with the *Sunday Telegraph* at Easter, Mrs Thatcher showed that she was well aware of the Interim responses<sup>ix</sup>. She cogently expressed the government's worries about a dissident force of History teachers refusing to deliver an imposed National History Curriculum, but she could have made the comment that the fact that teachers have successfully been teaching certain courses for years does not necessarily mean that a change would be a bad thing. Many of the responses were from teachers who were obviously worried about change and loss of autonomy. Some threatened to resign rather than be forced to teach the recommended new courses.

Primary teachers were expecting to receive copies of the *Interim Report* at their schools, and by the time they realised they would not, it was too late for many to respond. Key stage 1 met with almost universal approval. On key stage 2 most of those that did comment complained that 12 units were too many, though they liked the idea of core and options. Many could not see how History could fit in to any of their existing ideas of integrated topic work. Some complained that the Middle Ages had been omitted from key stage 2, others bemoaned the fact that the thematic unit 'Castles and Cathedrals' had been consigned to key stage 3, when Castles was an ideal topic for key stage 2. Some complained that the sample programme of study, 'Ships and Seafarers' was ridiculously overloaded with content and disconnected facts, and would be impossible to teach to this age-group. Others, though admittedly not primary teachers, thought that this unit was excellent.

One favourite but unfortunate criticism by primary teachers was to liken the unit titles to chapter headings in an Unstead textbook. Another criticism was that the methodology and philosophy of key stage 1 could not be extended into at least the first year of key stage 2. The name of John West was mentioned several times in this context (*History 7-13*, Dudley Teachers' Centre 1981). There seemed to be a dilemma here - how to reconcile the Unstead-style content with the John West-style statements of attainment? Future years will tell if it can be done. John West is a writer and very sound historian. He believes thoroughly in the value of stories and the use of evidence (pictorial, documentary and artefactual) in the classroom. A somewhat more rigidly chronological structure than the one he recommends in his Dudley Project will not prevent teachers from following his methodology. Only the British history core units were recommended for teaching in chronological order. The rest could be taught in any order, and

the long-term thematic or optional units really would lend themselves to the kind of sequencing and time-line treatment that West has used so successfully with children. The great beauty of West's work is in the very imaginative combination of all these strategies in the learning process - sequencing pictures, stories based on artefacts (e.g. 'My Father's Medals'), sequencing with artefacts, stories based on pictures (e.g. 'When Did You Last See Your Father?'), documents from local history revealing interesting stories about colourful characters – all of this really marvellous and imaginative.

I have a lasting impression of masses of detailed comment about every possible aspect of the report. There were many complaints about omissions. The omission of the Second World War was regarded as a foolish error not so much on historical grounds as for moral and ethical reasons. The omission of the First World War also met with many complaints, as did the lack of a unit on the Reformation. The inclusion of 'Sport and Society' and 'Entertainment and Society' was regarded as frivolous in the light of the more serious omissions.

Many academics as well as some private citizens and teachers thought that European History had been under-represented throughout the course, and that this would give a very unbalanced view of British History. To see European History only from a British perspective was considered to be very distorting. The length of some of the European units was criticized 'Russia and the USSR: 1917 to 1945' was considered to allow insufficient time to enable pupils to understand Russia. It was felt that America and the USA in particular had received undue attention in the History Study Units, to the detriment of the study of European History. Many saw a hidden political agenda in this.

The question of resources was mentioned not only by teachers but also by private citizens who wrote to the DES in late 1989. In order to deliver this National Curriculum, where the programmes of study often dealt with unfamiliar material (e.g. 'Japan under the Shogunate', or 'India under the Moghuls'), extra money would have to be given to schools. Money for incentive allowances, especially in primary schools, would be needed to encourage and reward expertise in quite new and specialized fields. It would be impossible to make a success of this new curriculum without a massive input of funds. On the reverse side of this issue, there were complaints that introducing the new History Study Units would mean redundancy and wastage of resources, the favourite example being the abandonment of Schools History Project course, 'Medicine Through Time'.

The assignment of particular periods of History to certain key stages met with some criticism. A few academics deplored the fact that most of key stage 4 consisted of modern History (with the exception of 'The Greek Achievement'). They suggested an assumption here on the part of the History Working Group that earlier periods should be studied by younger pupils, and that therefore later periods were more complex than earlier

ones. It was felt by quite a few to be disappointing that the Dark Ages would not be studied beyond the age of eleven.

There was universal support among the teaching profession for the prominence given to Local History in key stage 2, though disappointment too that it did not have a stronger place in key stage 3, and some annoyance that it had no place at all in key stage 4. The History Working Group were adamant that Local History could be rigorous and as worthwhile as any other sort of History. Local History is British History. British History is Local History.

There was wide support for the notion of a core of British History in the new curriculum, but a wide range of views about what that might mean. There seems to be a growing perception that British History must be seen not in isolation but in a European and world context, both now and in the past that is being studied. British History should not (despite the tenor of Mr Baker's early instructions to the Working Party) be Whig History, but should embrace a variety of points of view and interpretations. Neither should it be purely political History. (The PESC formula, seen in its infancy in the *Interim Report*, met with general approval as a good way forward for the sake of balance.) And British should be interpreted in its full sense, embracing not only Welsh, Irish and Scottish history as well as English, but also the contributions which wave after wave of settlers have made – the responses to the National Curriculum History Working Group's *Interim Report* did indeed constitute a Domesday in the History of British History by endorsing this new view of British History and putting down markers for future development. There also seemed to be a growing consensus about what History teaching should actually consist of; the developments of a new type of History-teaching involving a greater use of source material had been largely accepted, but it was also felt that these methods needed to be nurtured within a more settled and 'predictable' context (in the best sense of that word). The few swipes at conceptual development having a greater place in the attainment targets than a respect for knowledge perhaps ignore the fact that knowledge is conceptual, and that historical knowledge is perhaps the most conceptual (and imaginative) of all forms of knowledge because it involves perceptions of a vanished past. A minority hinted at unease about the assessment implications of putting conceptual development (which is essentially abstract) at the forefront of some assessment targets when the possession of concrete knowledge may not receive sufficient recognition in assessment procedures. However, those who favour the broad sweep were not dissatisfied by the *Interim Report*. Some of course thought that the sweep was too broad and that the recommended courses expected too much of pupils and their teachers.

Particularly cheering is the support which the philosophy of the *Interim Report* received from university historians. Its projected implementation in a practical context brought much criticism from teachers, but much of this was a comment about the general nature of the National Curriculum, and not necessarily about History in particular.

Jonathan Clark wrote in March that what was needed was a new kind of narrative British History.<sup>x</sup> I could not agree more. Accompanying the National Curriculum should be a range of new British narratives which encompass all of the statements of attainment and all of the listed items of 'essential information', and which provide all the breadth of the PESC formula as well as the scope of what 'British' really means in terms of English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish. These can include the historical context (in terms of imperial Britain and post-imperial) of the successive waves of immigration and settlement which have contributed to the development of Britain. He remarks that there is no consensual vision of 'our' past as a basis for the National Curriculum. He implies that he may deplore the growth of pluralism which has replaced a conservative view of the past. Current interpretations do not always have to reflect the prevailing orthodoxy (he scorns the proliferation of museums and heritage centres as the detritus of a post-historical post-thinking age). The trend for empathy he sees as a part of this process of decay – the mere appearance of historical insight without first having to submit to the hard process of learning facts and acquiring a sound background knowledge. A heritage is a tradition of thought and action which, according to Jonathan Clark, cannot be gained merely by visiting National Trust properties and looking at material objects. But how many people actually do *just* that? I do not share Dr Clark's despair. I welcome the fact that so many of our old houses are open to the public and I think that the proliferating museums, industrial and other, are a healthy way of displaying Britain's past. If historians want this new outburst of available sites and museums to be accompanied by a similar interest in the ideas and actions of the past, then they must get to work and do just what Dr Clark suggests – write more narratives – pluralistic, broadly British, political, economic, technological, scientific, social, religious and cultural, multi-interpretational and sincere. The world of academic historians must seek to help the world of history teachers. History teachers have to be involved with setting tasks and activities. Children, pupils, students are not all passive pieces of blotting paper ready, eager and willing to soak up knowledge. Their ages make it essential for them to be active. Knowledge as an end product of historical learning has to be actively acquired as well as passively.

History as a story is how a large number of private individuals and some academic historians see History 5-16, according to the evidence contained in the responses to the *Interim Report*. Chronology, with teaching programmes of study in chronological order, was perceived as supporting this view of History, and particularly British History, as a continuous narrative - a narrative that would be easier to understand if approached in the order which corresponds to the order in which things actually happened. An appreciation of the great stories, mythic or even legendary (e.g. Alfred and the Cakes or the Death of Nelson) was regarded by many as a desirable necessity. Even Denis Lawton, former Professor of the Institute of Education at the University of London, writing in 1983, believed in the educational value of 'a selection from the culture'.<sup>xi</sup> The relationship



between the view of history as a story and the view of history as a vehicle for the progressive acquisition of certain skills and concepts might seem potentially a very vexed one. One can compare it to some extent with the relationship between Old and New Testament theology. The former, in its simplest form, might seem to require only adherence to the Law, the latter might seem to regard righteous behaviour as an outcome of the life of faith. In actual fact the latter attitude is also present in the Old Testament, especially in the Prophets. The theology of the *Interim Report* represented a landmark, perhaps only a brief respite, in the dispute between the two schools of content and skills. But, like Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1594-97), which marked a theological compromise in the context of a National Church, the *Interim Report* marks a judicious educational and intellectual compromise in the context of a National Curriculum. Most of the 1,000 respondents recognised this first attempt at a philosophical solution, many quibbled about the details, but welcomed having been given a chance to give their own criticisms and alternatives. It was a creative and fruitful exercise, and it was a great privilege to have been able to participate actively in it.

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#### NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Department of Education and Science and the Welsh Office. *National Curriculum History Working Group Final Report*. 1990, p 205.

<sup>ii</sup> Department of Education and Science and the Welsh Office. *National Curriculum History Working Group Interim Report*. 1989

<sup>iii</sup> Department of Education and Science. Letter from John MacGregor. Secretary of State for Education and Science. to Philip Halsey LVO. Chairman of School Examination and Assessment Council. 3 April 1990.

<sup>iv</sup> Ngaio Crequer, 'Minister Attacked Over History Lessons'. *Independent*. 6 April 1990.

<sup>v</sup> F. Crick and J. D. Watson. *The Double Helix*. 1968.

<sup>vi</sup> Jerome S. Bruner, *The Process of Education*. Cambridge. Mass. 1960; and *Towards a Theory of Instruction*. Cambridge. Mass. 1960.

<sup>vii</sup> For example, A. Blyth and others, *Place, Time and Society*, 8-13: *An Introduction and Curriculum Planning*, Collins ESL Bristol for the Schools Council, 1976; John West, *History 7-13 (Guidelines. Structures and Resources with 50 Classroom Examples)*, Dudley Teachers' Centre, Dudley Metropolitan Authority, 1981.

<sup>viii</sup> Bertrand Russell, *An Enquiry into Meaning and Truth*, 1910; A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 1936.

<sup>ix</sup> Interview with Margaret Thatcher, *Sunday Telegraph*, 15 April 1990.

<sup>x</sup> Jonathan Clark, 'Is our history unteachable?', *Daily Telegraph*, 26 March 1990.

<sup>xi</sup> Denis Lawton. *Curriculum Studies and Educational Planning*, Hodder and Stoughton 1983.